A bout seven years after Erin Cobb, CPP, started her Erin Cobb Photography studio in Huntsville, Alabama, she decided it was time to get her certified professional photographer (CPP) credential. At Imaging USA 2012, she attended a session that explained the PPA certification process.

“Hearing it broken down into steps is what really got the ball rolling,” Cobb says. “It made it feel more attainable.” By the time Imaging rolled back around in 2013, Cobb was ready for the first phase, the written exam.

Because Cobb had been a working pro for several years, she felt confident in her technical knowledge. “I didn’t really spend any time studying for the test,” she says. “I figured if I didn’t pass, I would study and take it again. I have to prioritize how I spend my time, and I didn’t want to take away from work time.”

That approach worked for Cobb initially; she soon found out she’d cleared this first hurdle. Cobb points out that she’s always been a good test taker and doesn’t suffer from test anxiety. She says she would never have forgone studying if she hadn’t felt secure in her technical knowledge. “I

**WHAT’S HOLDING YOU BACK?**

**Q&A with PPA Senior Manager of Certification Julia Boyd**

**PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER:** What holds photographers back from getting their CPP?

**JULIA BOYD:** Both lack of knowledge and fear are common roadblocks toward certification. Those who are newer to the industry feel they’re not ready to pursue certification or don’t know enough about the program to realize that CPP is a foundational building block meant to strengthen their skills. Those who’ve been in the industry for a while might think they aren’t going to gain anything from becoming certified. However, they end up refreshing their knowledge while becoming immersed in an active community with great opportunities for continuing education and mentoring others. Every candidate enters the program at a different level, but every CPP ends up operating at a higher level because of the knowledge and confidence gained.

**PP:** Why get certified?

**JB:** Consumers understand the word “certified.” When given a choice between a certified professional or a non-certified professional in any industry, the consumer is going to choose the certified pro. It gives potential clients confidence in their decision and makes their choice easier.

**PP:** Are stories like Erin Cobb’s common?

**JB:** Erin’s story is common only in the fact that she says, “I was not knowledgeable enough about the requirements.” It’s crucial when preparing to submit images for review that candidates read through the image submission guidelines and fully understand them. If a candidate reads through the image submission guidelines and understands what the judges are looking for, they’ll have a better chance of success the first go-round.

**PP:** What advice do you have for photographers to get started?

**JB:** Understand the process and program guidelines, and ask for help. The CPP website is full of exam and image submission resources, and candidates should go through those and the FAQs before or immediately after declaring candidacy.

Your best friend for the exam is going to be the CPP test specifications, and the image submission videos and sample images are also very helpful. As Erin mentioned, there are a few Facebook groups administered by CPP liaisons that are active, namely The CPP Exam Study Group and the CPP Image Review Group. I encourage all candidates looking for extra help to check these out. Also, there is a CPP Candidate Community on the PPA community theLoop, where candidates can ask questions, get feedback, and stay connected.

**PP:** Any parting words of wisdom?

**JB:** Certification will be one of the greatest journeys you take as a professional photographer and PPA member. It’s an amazing community to be a part of, and I’ve seen firsthand the growth of individuals personally and professionally who get certified. Because of our dedicated committee members, CPP liaisons, and staff, there are people to help you at every turn. Never hesitate to reach out and ask a question at cppmailbox@ppa.com. So many amazing volunteers give their time to help others get certified because they believe in the program.
The image at right was rejected due to the lack of lighting control on the subjects. While the strong backlighting adds a believable feel to this image, the photographer should demonstrate control of the lighting on the subject by creating a stronger directional lighting pattern on the subjects.

Below, left, the image was submitted to demonstrate color harmony but was rejected due to blown-out highlights on the left side of the subject and the loss of detail in the back of the chair.

Below, right, incorrect exposure, blocked shadows, and loss of details were the culprits.
SAMPLES FROM COBB’S SUCCESSFUL CPP PORTFOLIO
THREE STEPS TO CPP

1. Declare your candidacy. It’s as simple as filling out a form online at ppa.com/cpp.
2. Pass the CPP exam. There’s an exam schedule online as well as a list of local CPP liaisons to help you navigate the process. Just register for the exam and take it.
3. Submit a portfolio. There are five two-week periods each year open to portfolio submission. The CPP information page provides everything you need to know about the compulsory images required as well as deadlines. You can submit images for review as many as three times before additional fees apply, giving you time to work on any key areas.

definitely wouldn’t advise other photographers to do it this way,” she says. “I just want to be honest about my approach.”

Buoyed by her success, Cobb took a similar approach to submitting her portfolio for review. She combed through her images and pulled out examples of client work that she felt exhibited the requirements of the compulsory images. The portfolio didn’t pass.

“It really did hurt my ego,” she admits. “I gave myself a good solid week of being really sad, then channeled all of that energy into figuring out what I needed to do to pass next time.”

Through her local CPP liaison, Cobb found a Facebook group where other CPPs post advice and portfolio critiques of CPP candidates.

“It was brutally educational,” says Cobb. “They are definitely not there to just tell you how great your work is. They’re there to help you pass CPP.”

Cobb dissected her failed images and pored over successful portfolio images, trying to decipher from the judges’ notes what key areas she needed to work on.

“I knew I could see the light, did well with composition and pulling out personalities, but I was having trouble controlling the light,” she says. And so she went beyond working with available light to see if she could nail the techniques of additive light required for attaining certification.

The second time around, Cobb shot portfolio images specifically with the CPP in mind. She submitted her revised portfolio in February, and it passed.

“I felt so grateful,” she says. “It would have felt great to pass on my first attempt, but really it felt so much better because I had been trying and working so hard for it. I truly mean it when I say I was glad that my first portfolio didn’t pass. The process of learning I went through because of that was invaluable.”

The images in her first portfolio remain some of her favorites to this day, she says. “I look at those images and I still love them,” she says. “But I now see the small things that prevented them from passing. I knew in my heart that everything had to do with the light. I was at the mercy of available light, and this forced me to figure out additive light. Hearing that criticism was so hard, but then it became motivating.”

See more of Erin Cobb’s work at erincobb.com.

Stephanie Boozer is a writer in Charleston, S.C.

DON’T SKIMP ON PREP

As chair of PPA’s Certification Committee, Teri Quance, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, sees a lot of certification hopefuls progress through the system. She knows how common it is for candidates to fall short on their first attempt. But success rates have improved of late, thanks to a more streamlined process and additional candidate resources.

“What we’re seeing is that with the requirement of taking the exam prior to submitting the portfolio, the quality of portfolios submitted has improved,” says Quance. “There are also so many more guides and resources out there for candidates to have success on their first round if they’re ready.”

Those resources are a must for candidates to succeed from the outset, she says, a point she can’t drive home enough.

“A candidate may effectively demonstrate short or broad lighting as a compulsory image, but what is often missed are the other technical aspects of an image such as color balance, composition, exposure, or posing,” she says. If a candidate demonstrates short light but poor color balance, the image will be rejected. Every image in a candidate’s portfolio must show solid technical skill as well as demonstrate the compulsory aspect, Quance notes.

Color balance is a big issue, she adds, as is overall exposure. It’s common for photographers to get so focused on the one compulsory point that everything else falls off their radar. She stresses that certification is intended to make better photographers and ensure clients get the best possible images.

“As professionals, we owe it to ourselves to get certified because it drives the level of the industry to a higher standard and holds photographers accountable,” she says. “We are all artists. Certification is not a box but a foundation on which to stand.”